Chapter 108

*Desdemona didn’t understand what had happened to her for a few hours. She was sitting in her captain’s conference room with the human and elf when she lost control of her voice. Then she found she couldn’t move. She strained to turn her head and work her mouth but nothing.*

*Then she heard her voice. It was ordering the guards out of the room. Panicked welled up and she fought to regain control of herself. Once the guards left one of the male elf attendants stood and walked over to her and looked into her eyes with amusement dancing in them.*

*She could feel it. An invisible blanket covered her mind and her control of her body. The elf smiled and said he would handle everything from here, and she could rest and go to sleep. Suddenly everything went black. But she was not asleep. She was just in a black void. She fought to regain herself…to find the blanket covering her and rip it away.*

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*Rae’Ver had been extremely happy with his new ship. He was finding intel and technology that would help him regain standing within the Sylvan. Not enough to eliminate his rogue status, but it was progress. What he truly needed was something that would help his people against the Mavelvolents. He was still focused on the Void Phoenix. They must have taken knowledge of that wave that had damaged his city ship with them when they escaped.*

*He was sitting in the captain’s ready room with the prior captain in the corner when the terminal flashed yellow. It was a notification that data was incongruent. He looked at the yellow notification. The agent Hanson Gammon was listed as MIA and yet he was accessing data archives outside of human-influenced space. He had already reviewed the combat footage of Hanson’s ship being lost to the Void Phoenix. He sent a new destination the bridge crew for his ship with Desdemona’s codes.*

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Our next port was eleven days of subspace travel. I spent my time focused on getting the new Tirani marines into custom Badger suits. Since I had a head start with Mozzie’s suit it was going fairly smoothly. Abby said the female Tirani were not as good at taking orders as their male counterparts. She called them ‘independent thinkers.’ If you told them to go from point A to point B, then they would stop at points C and D and have perfectly good reasons for doing so.

They were good marines, though but it was clear why the female of the Tirani liked to operate independently. Abby had planned to have all the Tirani operate as a single unit, but that had changed. She had them grouped into two three persons squads. Mozzie, Zarko, and Aerna were the first team with Aerna in charge. The second grouping was Nosawa, Konia, and Aribara, with Aribara in charge.

Aerna was the most experienced female Tirani among them, and she led Mozzie and Zarko extremely well. Abby considered them her Alpha team after just a few days in transit to the Macabre system. They dominated in VR simulations, and in physical combat rankings, they ranked in the three out of the top four spots.

Five days into the trip, I found Gabby working on another Tirani steward bot. She was already assembling it, and I was a little upset as I had not cleared the design or manufacture of the additional bot. Gabby argued that the Tirani woman on board had lobbied her for a male Tirani bot to fulfill the contract they had signed. She showed me the phrase, which had been a general accommodation clause. The Tirani argued that since the male Tirani had a female bot they needed an equitable accommodation of a male bot. Since it was a male bot, I knew Gabby had jumped on the project. She admitted that she didn’t ask in case I nixed the project and was going to tell me when she was closer to completion...she waved her hand at the partially assembled frame and jested that she was informing me now.

I lost the rest of my day working with Gabby on the male Tirani steward bot. She had done an excellent job and most of our work was solving minor problems. I let her continue her fabrication of the male bot after approving the plans and having Julie run her sims. I then had a conversation with Julie about not informing me of Gabby’s project. Julie was aware of everything that happened on board the ship. She most likely knew I had not authorized the build and Gabby was using the robotics lab design suite.

Julie tried to obfuscate the issue by sending 2,418 notifications to my PerCom of things I might want to be aware of at this current moment in time. She was friends with Abby so I could see why she hadn’t informed me but I stressed it was her duty to keep me informed. The amount of resources that went into a bots fabrication was substantial, and crew morale was Kara Briggs and Abby’s duty, not Gabby’s. I think I got through to the AI but planned to have Danielle check on her programming anyway.

As the new Badger suits became available, the Tirani collected them from the Robotics lab. Luna was serving as an instructor to help get the new marines acclimated to using the suits outside of the VR setting and watching the young woman work with the marines I was actually impressed. She was a good teacher; enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and efficient.

As we prepared to exit subspace I had equipped my marines with thirty Badger combat suits, six for the Tirani and twenty-four for the human marines. The only manufactured Gorilla heavy combat suit hadn’t been gathering dust. We were still refining it and considering its role in our forces.

As we dropped into the Makabre system I waited for the plot to fill out. Elvis, the AI in charge of translating and populating the data, started putting the screen. The massive ocean planet was orbited by two moons. One had an atmosphere, and the other was a dead moon. Space stations and space vessels filled the plots and even before we opened comms, we were being hailed.

I spoke and let them know we were here to refuel and trade. I sent the manifest of the dataslates and shell sculptures. Eventually, we were directed to a space station orbiting one of the gas giants in the outer system. That wasn’t a surprise. Even with most races openly trading with each other they didn’t like unknown ships in orbit over their populous planets.

It was a hydrogen processing station, and as we moved to dock a frigate-sized ship came in and attempted to scan our vessel. Since they couldn’t penetrate our hull, they wanted to do a boarding inspection. I had not expected this. Most traders were not searched, just the cargo that was offloaded. After talking with the Kara we decided to let them on board. She had searched the Tuleth regulations for weapons and alien tech.

Abby had twenty-three marines suited up as we waited on the frigate to send to the shuttle to us. The Tuleth that disembarked was squat and muscular with gray skin and gills. Two inspectors and two guards boarded the ship. The lead inspector used a translator and apologized for the inconvenience. He informed us that ships that did not regularly trade with the Tuleth were being inspected. Eight months ago, a small ship of unknown origin was sent into the atmosphere of the ocean planet and released an array of foreign fish. I didn’t understand until he explained that the alien fish were highly invasive and not edible to his race and were highly invasive. They were trying to contain the infestation now. As we walked the cargo bay with the four guests, I used my PerCom to ask Edmund about the fish. He had no information from his Brotherhood archives. That was some fishy galactic espionage.

The inspectors waved their scanners across crates, and we opened containers for them. They inspected aft engineering, the two passenger decks, and our flight deck. I was happy that our two heavy fighters were no longer stored in the hangers. We did get some grilling as all our shuttles had been replated with the alien hull material and stealth coating.

That concluded the inspection, and I was given a trader’s certification. I was told after twelve successful trips to this system, we would be allowed to dock on a station orbiting the ocean world. For now, we would have to pay the fees of having our cargo transported by the Tuleth to the planet. Knowing what I knew about the Brotherhood, I thought the Tuleth were not being cautious enough.

When we reached the station, we were not even allowed to dock with it. Another problem was the credit conversion with the Tuleth. They had their own currency, and trading in precious metals was tedious as they had a highly fluctuating market.

The data slates were a hot commodity as expected and all 10,000 were quickly consigned for sale and transport. It was Suruchi’s problem to figure out the amenable exchange. It was almost like a barter system as she tried to figure out what metals were available and if the value was enough in the provided quantities. It would have been nice if there had been a universal currency. We would just be adding to our stockpiles.

When I got the final numbers on the data slates, it looked like we made a huge profit. The large shell sculptures were also selling well, three to five times what Suruchi had paid.

Damian even said the fuel purity was much higher than advertised. I noted down in my logs that the Tuleth were fair but cautious traders. As we finished up our trading in four days I commed and asked the Tuleth about the human fleet. The Union fleet should have passed this way about eight months ago, according to my intelligence.

It took six hours and a small fee to get the info I wanted. I was sent sensor data of two human fleets that passed through. The fleets remained in the outer system while the fuel transports were resupplied. The fleets had been here nearly forty days, undergoing repairs and refueling. They left 197 days ago.

The scans were not detailed, and the human ships had their identifying transponders off. Elvis cleaned up the images as best he could, and the only capital ship we could identify for sure was the battleship *Bastion’s Shield*. That was the ship that Nila had been assigned to. I couldn’t identify my brother’s ships from the scans, but I was hopeful. Eighteen capital ships that were cruiser and larger, and sixty-two support ships had passed through this system. The Tuleth even supplied the relative vectors when they departed. A fleet that size would need to make long stops. If all goes well, we should be able to catch them in about a year’s time.

Our next stop was negotiations with the Squirrel. Suruchi added two trade goods to our hold. One was fermented milk from a mammalian sea creature. I tried it and thought it was quite good. The second was a silky textile from a creature like was described as jellyfish-like…if a jellyfish was two hundred feet in diameter. The second commodity was extremely cheap, and the textile was soft, silky, and extremely durable. The only issue Suruchi told me is that it was resistant to dyeing attempts, so the opaque white color was the only option. She still thought we could sell it for two to three hundred times what we were paying for it—to humans in the core worlds. Adding half a million square meters to our holds was worth the risk, and I allowed the purchase.

As we made our way out of the system to transition to subspace, Elias informed me that the Tuleth were engaging in combat with the other side of the system. Even focusing our sensors at that distance, we got very grainy images. The Tuleth didn’t respond to our requests for their scanning data, and I decided it was best to just leave. Four hours later, we transitioned earlier than planned.